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ABSTRACT

Four manifestations of organizational and professional segmentalism are discussed: the influence of the graduate school and the resulting preeminence of professional specialization; faculty orientation toward the discipline (and the department) rather than the institution; overspecialization in undergraduate degree programs; and faculty reward systems that reinforce the dominance of professional specialization over general education. It is suggested that general education and core curricula have been the areas influenced most by the professionalism of professors. It is claimed that faculty members who teach undergraduates are distracted from teaching by the demand of research and publication necessary for professional advancement and tenure. Furthermore, the training for a Ph.D. is tightly restricted to isolating and competitive research concerns. Few graduate schools offer any instruction in university teaching. It is concluded that deprofessionalization of university faculty is not a sensible option, since the production and utilization of knowledge, public belief, and academic freedom and autonomy are essential. The challenge for universities is to overcome the segmentalism of professional specialization. (SW)

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PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIZATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION: ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL REALITIES

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Presented at
The Annual Meeting of the
Association for the Study of Higher Education
Chicago, March 14, 1984

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PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIZATION AND
GENERAL EDUCATION:
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In her new book on innovation and productivity entitled The Change Masters, Rosabeth Kanter argues that integrative action is preferable to segmentalism. She describes integrative action as a "willingness to move beyond received wisdom, to combine ideas from unconnected sources, to embrace change as an opportunity to test limits." Segmentalist organizations, on the other hand, end up "assigning people to fragments rather than larger pieces; emphasizing uncrossable boundaries between functions, between hierarchical levels, between central staffs and field operations, and even between kinds of people." (8, pp. 27-31).

And so it is with universities. The intellectual potential of general education is stymied by organizational and professional segmentalism. While both the campus as a whole and the departments as units have rightful interests, the conflict is difficult to reconcile without significant cost to both campuses and departments. This paper focuses on four specific manifestations of organizational and professional segmentalism: the influence of the graduate school and the resulting preeminence of professional specialization; faculty orientation toward the discipline (and the department) rather than the institution; overspecialization in undergraduate degree programs; and faculty reward systems that reinforce the dominance of professional specialization over general education.

Professors as Professionals

The emergence of professors as professionals, as specialists in particular areas of knowledge, can be cast in a sociological context. Professions have been defined as "loose amalgamations of segments pursuing different objectives in different manners more or less held together under a common name at a particular period in history." This view of professions suggests a linkage with the professoriate, particularly in regard to disciplinary specialities, methodologies, client relationships and colleagueship (1, p. 326). Moreover, the very concept of competence in a particular specialty, along with autonomy and career commitment, serve as a key underpinning for any profession. (3, p. 406)

Academic professionals tend to be more concerned about their particular areas of interest than about their clients -- the students. It is not surprising that academics are unaccustomed to discussing client-professional relationships "because they feel they serve the cause of learning (as the priest serves God, not merely his parishoners) and because the student does not pay professors directly." They are bound by group norms rather than a code of ethics (4, pp. 293-294 and 305). And they do not want to define themselves as client-oriented when they have the choice of publishing or "perishing" (9, p. 188).

Although professors as professionals in universities as organizations may be "misleading analogues," professors continue to exercise control over matters which are of significance to them.

Conflict between faculty members occurs "over the kind of people to recruit, curriculum, socialization processes, what constitutes acceptable research, and the methodologies that are appropriate" (3, p. 467). As Jencks and Riesman concluded in their milestone study of The Academic Revolution, "if one defines a profession as a group that claims the right to regulate itself, determining its own methods and judging its own members, academicians might be judged the most professionalized of all occupational groups (7, p.238).

Impact on General Education

General education and core curricula, as the basic components of undergraduate education, have been the areas influenced most by the professionalism of professors. General education in the 1920s was a reaction to graduate education and the elective system in "that specialization had gotten out of hand, that knowledge was becoming too fragmented, that research was being overemphasized, and that the transcendent truths and eternal verities were being lost in the process" (7, p. 494). Perhaps in response to these complaints (as well as to the onset of World War II), there was some reform movement among some institutions. One of the best known attempts at general education was the 1945 Harvard Report, General Education in a Free Society, popularly (and somewhat ironically) known as the "Redbook." The "Redbook" committee planned to follow-up on its report by developing core courses in the humanities, the social sciences, and science and mathematics, but, "that aspiration fell victim to faculty power" (12, p. 259).

More recently, a faculty committee at Stanford declared that "the most intractable" problem facing undergraduate education since World War II has been "the continued multiplication of specialism with spreading emphasis on the importance to the student of developing marketable skills" (2, p. 7). Writing from the opposite coast, another scholar found that "departmental power sustains the inertia afflicting Harvard and other universities." Departmental dominance is blamed on the graduate school, which "may well be the linchpin of the whole system." It is really hypocritical to ask students to resist narrow areas of concentration when the faculty "are unwilling or unable to be models." Faculty members during the 1960s abolished requirements "because it freed faculty from tasks many did not want -- the teaching of courses outside their specialization." Thus, "professionalization within the university has sapped our ability to provide the general education Americans need" (10, pp. 37-39).

The reward structure reinforces the focus on professional specialization. Faculty members who teach undergraduates "are distracted from teaching by the demand of research and publication necessary for professional advancement and tenure." New undergraduates "more often than not encounter young instructors who have themselves avoided a broad, general education as undergraduates, and whose interests are further refined as faculty members within an academic environment that is more restrictive than expansive" (13, pp. 35-39). It also seems that professional specialization "has threatened to transform the university into a way station for careerist undergraduates and a loose confederation of isolated

sovereign departments and professional schools" (11, p. 15). Thus we have the "paradox in which colleges and universities -- with the ablest, best published, most highly qualified faculties of all time -- are unable to generate any accolades in the area of undergraduate education" (6, p. 178).

Influence of the Graduate School

And so we return to the graduate school. The training for a Ph.D. is tightly restricted to isolating and competitive research concerns. Yet the Ph.D. provides the de facto teaching certificate for the integrative and collaborative activity known as college teaching. Few graduate schools offer any instruction in university teaching, nor has there been much discipline-based interest in accumulating knowledge about teaching effectiveness. Undergraduate education is often seen as a "downward extension" of graduate schools; in fact, the "more orthodox and prestigious pattern is to offer a pre-graduate major aimed almost exclusively at future professionals." Most professors "given their choice ... would probably teach an undergraduate course now and then," as long as it does not "interfere with their 'real' work." Jencks and Riesman concluded that "graduate schools are, therefore, by far the most important shapers of undergraduate education. It is, indeed, only a small exaggeration to say that undergraduate education in most universities and university colleges is simply a cut-rate, mass-produced version of graduate education" (7, pp. 244-248).

Conclusion

One possible solution to this problem is to "deprofessionalize" the faculty. Deprofessionalization has been defined as "a loss to professional occupations of their unique qualities, particularly their monopoly over knowledge, public belief in their service ethos, and expectations of work autonomy and authority over the client" (5, p. 197). The medical profession has accomplished a partial reaggregation with the emergence of the family practioner. And the faculty monopoly on knowledge is partially breached by in-house corporate training programs, home-study courses, neighborhood discussion groups, and the mass media. But deprofessionalizaton of university faculty is not a sensible option. The production and utilization of knowledge, public belief, and academic freedom and autonomy are essential to our society.

The challenge for universities, then, is to overcome the segmentalism of professional specialization because, as Rosabeth Kanter concludes in The Change Masters, "as long as segmented structures and segmentalist attitudes make the very idea of innovation run against the culture grain, there is a tension between the desire for innovation and the continued blocking of it by the organization itself" (8, p. 75).

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